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SIPDIS

OFFICIAL INFORMAL

FOR SA/INS

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SUBJECT: OFFICIAL INFORMAL NUMBER 052 (04/01/04)

Classified by DCM James F. Entwistle for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

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SRI LANKA GEARS UP FOR ELECTION

1. (C) FYI. We want to flag the following items related to Sri Lanka's parliamentary elections, which take place tomorrow, April 2:

-- We are sending out a snapshot of Sri Lanka on the eve of the election, which you should see in a front-channel tonight.

-- There continues to be an argument between the Election Commission and the President's office over the Election Commissioner's recent decision to take over the electronic state-run media, including television and radio. A bench of the Supreme Court on March 30 rejected a request from the President's office to reverse the Election Commissioner's ruling. In the meantime, the President continues to control the state-run newspapers (news coverage in these papers is very much skewed in favor of the President's UPFA party, to put it mildly).

-- A poll by the Org-MARG-Smart group, released earlier this week, predicted the following results of tomorrow's election: 99 seats for the PM's UNP party, 101 for the President's UPFA and 13 to the pro-Tiger TNA. We are not vouching for the poll's results, but it is interesting to note that this poll also predicts that the JHU party, which is running an all-monk slate, will take nine seats. If JHU does that well, it would be quite a showing. Overall, the poll basically predicts a hung parliament. (The poll was taken in both rural and urban areas and in all regions, save those under LTTE control.)

-- Mission's ten teams (officers and FSNs) are fanning out across the country to get in place for informal election observation activities tomorrow. (POL)

SITUATION IN EAST

2. (C) FYI. The Ambassador spoke today with Norwegian Ambassador Brattskar, who confirmed that the situation in Batticaloa remains tense. There were many conflicting reports about exactly what was transpiring. Brattskar said the SLMM is patrolling the east, including in areas held by breakaway rebel leader Karuna, as well as those held by the main LTTE organization. Brattskar said the monitors noted that there were "no burning shops" and no people fleeing the region en masse, as had been reported. (There have been reports that Karuna has ordered all "Jaffna" Tamils to leave areas under his control, for example.) Brattskar noted that both the Karuna side and the main LTTE led by V. Prabhakaran were stepping up the rhetoric ahead of election day, thus adding to the tension. He also noted that there were various rumors that the killing of a TNA candidate on March 30 had been perpetrated by either the Karuna faction, or the main LTTE, or some unnamed "third force." (Note: Most observers here believe the main LTTE was behind the shooting, as do we.) Brattskar also noted that the LTTE continues to call his Embassy to discuss the elections, and specifically to make sure that Tamils living in LTTE-controlled areas are allowed to vote freely and fairly. In the meantime, Mission USAID/OTI staff in the east report that the rumors are swirling thick and furious, including one rumor that Paduman, the former LTTE strongman in Trincomalee, has been killed in the Vanni. (This rumor had also circulated in early March, but was judged not to be true at that time.) Overall, the east remains very much on edge, we would say. (POL)

COLOMBO PLAN

13. (SBU) Any response to our request last week for clarity from IO re the Colombo Plan? (DCM)

LUNSTEAD